United Nations

A/51/PV.1

General Assembly

Fifty-first Session

Official Records

1st plenary meeting
Tuesday, 17 September 1996, 3 p.m.
New York

Temporary President: Mr. Freitas do Amaral . . . . . (Portugal)

The meeting was called to order at 3.30 p.m.

Item 1 of the provisional agenda

Opening of the session by the Chairman of the delegation of Portugal

The Temporary President: I declare open the fifty-first session of the General Assembly.

Item 2 of the provisional agenda

Minute of silent prayer or meditation

The Temporary President: Before calling on representatives to observe a minute of silent prayer or meditation in accordance with rule 62 of the rules of procedure, I propose that as we do so we also observe the International Day of Peace, on this third Tuesday of September, as proclaimed by the General Assembly in its resolution 36/67 of 30 November 1981, to be devoted to commemorating and strengthening the ideals of peace both within and among all nations and peoples.

I now invite representatives to stand and observe one minute of silent prayer or meditation.

The members of the General Assembly observed a minute of silent prayer or meditation.

Item 121 of the provisional agenda

Scale of assessments for the apportionment of the expenses of the United Nations (A/51/366)

The Temporary President: Before turning to the next item on our agenda, I should like, in keeping with the established practice, to invite the attention of the General Assembly to document A/51/366, which has been circulated in the General Assembly Hall this afternoon. It contains a letter addressed to me by the Secretary-General in which he informs the Assembly that nine Member States are in arrears in the payment of their financial contributions to the United Nations within the terms of Article 19 of the Charter.

I should like to remind delegations that, under Article 19 of the Charter,

> "A Member of the United Nations which is in arrears in the payment of its financial contributions to the Organization shall have no vote in the General Assembly if the amount of its arrears equals or exceeds the amount of the contributions due from it for the preceding two full years."

May I take it that the General Assembly duly takes note of this information?

It was so decided.

96-86199 (E)

This record contains the original text of speeches delivered in English and interpretations of speeches delivered in the other languages. Corrections should be submitted to original speeches only. They should be incorporated in a copy of the record and be sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned, *within one month of the date of the meeting*, to the Chief of the Verbatim Reporting Service, Room C-178. Corrections will be issued after the end of the session in a consolidated corrigendum.

Item 3 of the provisional agenda

Credentials of representatives to the fifty-first session of the General Assembly

(a) Appointment of the members of the Credentials Committee

The Temporary President: Rule 28 of the rules of procedure provides that the General Assembly at the beginning of each session shall appoint, on the proposal of the President, a Credentials Committee consisting of nine members.

Accordingly, it is proposed that, for the fifty-first session, the Credentials Committee should consist of the following Member States: China, the Dominican Republic, Gabon, the Netherlands, Paraguay, the Philippines, the Russian Federation, Sierra Leone and the United States of America.

May I take it that the States I have mentioned are hereby appointed members of the Credentials Committee?

It was so decided.

Item 4 of the provisional agenda

Election of the President of the General Assembly

The Temporary President: I now invite members of the General Assembly to proceed to the election of the President of the fifty-first session of the General Assembly.

May I recall that, in accordance with paragraph 1 of the annex to General Assembly resolution 33/138, the President of the General Assembly at the fifty-first session should be elected from among the Asian States.

In this connection, I have been informed by the Chairman of the Group of Asian States that the Group has endorsed the candidacy of His Excellency Mr. Razali Ismail of Malaysia for the presidency of the General Assembly.

Taking into account the provisions of paragraph 16 of annex VI to the rules of procedure, I therefore declare His Excellency Mr. Razali Ismail of Malaysia elected President of the General Assembly at its fifty-first session by acclamation.

I extend my sincere congratulations to His Excellency Mr. Razali Ismail, and I invite him to assume the presidency.

I request the Chief of Protocol to escort the President to the podium.

Mr. Razali Ismail took the Chair.

Address by Mr. Razali Ismail, President of the General Assembly at its fifty-first session

The President (spoke in Malay; English text furnished by the delegation of Malaysia): I am indeed appreciative of and grateful for the trust and confidence the members of delegations placed in me by giving me the mandate to head the fifty-first session of the United Nations General Assembly as its President. I would like to take this opportunity to extend my appreciation to His Excellency Mr. Diogo Freitas do Amaral, President of the recently concluded fiftieth session of the General Assembly, for having led the fiftieth session in an extremely effective and professional manner.

I wish to extend a very warm welcome to all members of delegations to the fifty-first regular session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, commencing 17 September 1996 and continuing to 23 December 1996. It is my fervent hope that this fifty-first session will be conducted in a congenial atmosphere with mutual respect and cooperation. I am confident that with hard work, dedication and commitment, our efforts will be rewarded with results that will benefit all humankind.

(spoke in English)

I am deeply humbled by this occasion, and by the great honour to my country, Malaysia. My assumption of the presidency of the fifty-first session of the General Assembly reflects the Assembly's acknowledgement of Malaysia's involvement in, and contribution to, multilateral affairs, and in particular to the United Nations. Malaysia's involvement has become particularly pronounced under Prime Minister Mr. Mahathir Mohamad.

Many speeches have been made in this Assembly that eulogize the purposes and principles of the Charter and entreat Member States to commit to them. Yet despite great strides made with decolonization and the elimination of apartheid, those purposes and principles remain today largely unrealized. The world is plagued by

multiple expressions of inequality that continue to perpetuate human misery and entrench deprivation. A world not yet free of nuclear weapons has to contend with the re-emergence of ethnic and religious enmity, combining with poverty and environmental degradation to elevate global insecurity to explosive levels.

The interconnectedness of our world is accepted by us, but this Assembly still bears witness to gross injustice in many dimensions of human life. At this time of incredible scientific discovery, when our knowledge and means allow us to seek a common destiny based on common interests, the international community fails in its determination to overcome these global problems.

As representatives of 185 Member States, we need to examine why we continue to fail in overcoming the narrow boundaries of our national interests and neglect to deliver our promises of a better world. Perhaps such expectations of the international community are too unrealistic, and the ideals of the Charter too lofty, so that they defy realization.

The General Assembly begins its fifty-first session without celebration but amidst criticism of the United Nations inability to respond adequately to international crises. The United Nations as an Organization faces a financial crisis that threatens to cripple it. The Organization's effectiveness is seen to be hampered by allegations of mismanagement and inefficiency and a dysfunctional institutional framework. The cries for reform do not originate only from Member States but are voiced in equal measure by world opinion outside. The United Nations not only has to grapple with systemic problems but faces even greater difficulties when its role and abilities are examined against the backdrop of global events and emerging trends.

As I take on the presidency, I need to draw upon my last eight years as Malaysia's Permanent Representative. I hope they stand me in good stead, enabling me to understand the ecosystem of the United Nations, and to have friends and colleagues with a common purpose within the intergovernmental system, the Secretariat community and civil society outside. I need their help, and I extend my appeal to them for all that I have to do as President.

As in the past, we have a provisional agenda which, for this session, has 163 items so far, ranging from those dealing with the peace and security agenda to those dealing with development — including development assistance — human rights, women, youth and drugs, *inter alia*. In addressing these important items, I hope that the syndrome of "business as usual" will be discarded. What we do here at this Assembly, at great expense, is being given critical scrutiny outside. Clearly, what we produce from our deliberations must matter, must make a difference. Our sense of purpose and work methods are being questioned. The occasions of long delays and long lunches which lead to more delays, at enormous cost, are over. So, too, I trust, is the torture of long, unfocused speeches in the Committees.

At this fifty-first session, the General Assembly will be involved in selecting a Secretary-General. I am confident that the Assembly, representing the larger membership, in cooperation with the Security Council, will play a constructive role and, with wisdom and impartiality, will determine a course of action that will protect and enhance the integrity of the institution of the United Nations.

The special session on the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development will also be an important event for the fifty-first General Assembly. For this occasion, it is not enough for us to take a hard critical look at the decisions made in Rio de Janeiro. The United Nations has a special responsibility for operationalizing sustainable development. Decisions from this review must demonstrate the delivery capacity of the United Nations, and delegates would be failing in their duty if the consensus we arrived at were seen as empty of significance and content. If the United Nations cannot be the main player in development resources, it must at least be the main development catalyst, and one that can strongly influence coordination at the macro level with other bodies that have more access to resources, but that are less democratically set up.

On disarmament, the General Assembly should benefit from the recent development pertaining to the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty. Given the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty and the important Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on the legality of nuclear weapons, nuclear disarmament will now be at centre stage of General Assembly consideration, with expected outcomes that must benefit the aspirations of humanity.

Items pertaining to social development, including such issues as human rights, women, children, the disabled and the dispossessed are equally important. No less significant are the situation in the Middle East and current developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina and

many other parts of the world, whether in Africa, Asia or Latin America, which deserve our attention. Africa and the least-developed countries demand our special consideration as well.

During the fifty-first session of the General Assembly I look forward to facilitating the greater involvement of members of civil society in our work, building upon the success of the Economic and Social Council. The non-governmental organizations are agents of multilateralism at the grass-roots level, where forces of change often take root. We must benefit from their wisdom and their contribution. Their involvement will not erode the intergovernmental process. On the contrary, it will strengthen it.

Member States of the United Nations must decide whether the principles of multilateral cooperation have value or not. If they do, we must determine the ways and means of articulating the form and process of such cooperation. Central to this is whether the United Nations is the appropriate institution. This in turn is related to the nature and value system of our societies, projecting into the future. We should ask: Have the ideals of social justice and compassion diminished to the extent that national self-interest no longer requires us to deal with the needs of others? Can Member States disengage from the threats and misery of the world in the context of self-interest? Looking around us, it is clear that an array of non-military threats to human security continues to confront us. Global problems such as environmental degradation and pollution, the spread of infectious diseases, the international trafficking in drugs, organized crime, the mass movement of peoples and the crisis of environmental and social sustainability require global solutions. These phenomena and the forces that impel them cross national boundaries, affect whole populations, cannot be ameliorated by military means, and require international cooperation for their resolution.

The strong links between peace, development and human security are embodied in the United Nations Charter itself. The globalization of trade and the movement of capital and markets around the world have not bridged the growing disparity in wealth between the poor and the rich. This gap grows wider both between and within nations.

It is in the role of improving the economic and social conditions of people that the United Nations should assert itself more aggressively. This is also a role that is most daunting, and one where results have been meagre. National Governments are losing their political room to manoeuvre because of growing economic pressures and demands that can turn them into agents of the global marketplace and diminish the State's autonomy as an effective global actor. The United Nations can play a critical role in identifying the resources for poor developing countries and assessing the social impact of the world economic order by ensuring overall policy coordination between the Bretton Woods institutions and the World Trade Organization. The United Nations should also monitor the activities of transnational companies, which wield so much power.

The intergovernmental process as practised in the United Nations faces the problem of reconciling the contradictory impulses of upholding global norms and universal rights with the requirements of protecting sovereignty. The participation of civil-society actors in the United Nations could mitigate power politics and could relieve the tensions between the dictates of universality and national sovereignty.

A hard look should be given to the laborious nature of consensus decision-making, which frequently rests on the lowest common denominator. Maybe representatives to the United Nations are too distant from the problems they are charged to address, and the camaraderie of diplomatic life has softened the edges of critical judgement. It is a moot point whether we should delegate the solution of global problems to international diplomacy alone. International diplomacy does not seem to deal with the critical time factor. Months if not years pass before international agreements are negotiated and implemented. Environmental destruction, for example, which can lead to serious contamination or deforestation, is faster than the political potential for protection and implementation. Also, we must not allow ourselves to cast about for so-called solutions at the United Nations that will merely keep our own power and standards of living intact when we are determining the fate and livelihood of others.

The United Nations must begin to embed itself in reality and push the critical issues, especially poverty and social injustice, to the centre of national and public debate. What will it take to do this? Of immediate need is political will by Member States to commit to the principles of democracy and accountability. The nature of democratic practice needed for such an enterprise is one based on careful deliberation and consultation so that compromise to the lowest value is minimized in favour of optimizing the best options that will protect universal values.

The reform process must begin with finding a political consensus on what the United Nations should be and what it can do. A coherent and feasible strategy for the future, a narrower mandate, committed resources and streamlined priorities, combined with responsible and inspired leadership, are prerequisites in this process to achieve a relevant and vital United Nations for the future.

I humbly urge all Member States to seize this moment for substantial change and to imbue this opportunity with constructiveness, in a spirit of tolerance and compromise. I extend this appeal also to the Secretariat of the United Nations, maligned and unappreciated but on which the intergovernmental process strongly depends. It is my view that there can be no real serious reform of the United Nations without both Member States and the Secretariat coming together at an early stage to determine a common premise for reform or for undertaking major initiatives. Lessons must be learnt from recent events, or the United Nations as a whole will be the casualty.

The United Nations, finally, is not a world government. In a sense, an association of States has come together to make the United Nations a global institution to serve the interests of all, extending beyond Governments, drawing creative energies from the world's diversity itself. The fate of the United Nations depends primarily on how much its Members are willing to invest in a viable Organization and on what universal values are strongly held on to. Today, tragedies of huge proportions happen when the United Nations does not stand up to power considerations that undermine universal values. Consider Bosnia and Rwanda. The onus lies primarily upon the major Powers. The United Nations cannot be the vessel of power politics. Neither can it be sustained by noble interests and lofty principles alone. We have to construct a critical equilibrium.

The meeting rose at 4 p.m.